



Should academics make videos? Response to *Ghosts of the Future*

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Abstract

This is a reviewer's response to a video submission to ACME by Kelvin Mason.

Keywords

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Should academics make videos?

What sort of videos?

What about activist-academics doing research with and for a social movement?

Should our videos be any different?

Most of my reviewer suggestions were, as Kelvin Mason characterizes them in his response, technical. I suggested edits in the hopes that more people would watch the video, and fully hear and understand the ideas, words, and the plays on words. His response is disarmingly honest. He did not go back and make these edits because he was already at the limit of his technological capacity.



Videos are a powerful way for us as academics to engage broader audiences, and simply to engage with each other differently. But making videos is one more skill for us to learn, in all our non-existent spare time, with all our spare resources. Recording equipment and editing software can get seriously pricey.

Yet there is a growing trend online towards quick and dirty videos simply shot with a phone and barely edited, simply using free software to crop the in and out point, and add a logo screen at the beginning. I recently spoke at CEDLA, the Latin American Studies Center at the University of Amsterdam. As part of the talk they asked me to do [this 3 minute video](#) for them. They asked to describe myself first and what my talk had been about, and then asked me just one question, and gave me a timer so that I would not go over. They asked me to do this after my talk, while I was still jazzed about the discussion and in answer mode.

Before arriving they had sent me [this fantastic description and how-to](#) of what they were doing, put out by the group akvo, which has now put up over 1,000 short video interviews with their partners around the world. As they put it, these videos bring the issues and the people they work with to life. They emphasize that to get viewership video should be around 3 minutes, and not go over 4. I am sure you have noticed that this is the maximum length of most of the videos that get circulated on social media, and many are even shorter.

Yet TED talk videos are longer. They are 18 minutes, supposedly so that the time spent can be justifiable as a coffee break. Mason's video, Ghosts of the Future, is 20 minutes long, and so I suggested several places that it could be cut back, as well as places that he could have added more explanation about what the protest was about and pictures of the actions he was describing. His response that he does not have the technical capacity to do this is perfectly legitimate. Even if he did, as akvo puts in on their [how-to site](#):

Anything that gets in the way of producing rapid-fire video is getting in the way, full stop. You don't have time for complexity – video is a sideline for you. It's not your real job. **Editing is the enemy** If you want to find a way to eat your time, get into editing video – how the hours will fly by!

I propose that we be realistic about what we can expect from ourselves and each other when we make videos. But even rough video is powerful, and we could make better use of it as a tool for connecting differently and more broadly. ACME is particularly well placed to be on the leading edge of this, being an online only journal. Harker (2007) published a piece in ACME as an extended engagement with a video art piece. It includes several video clips, and is the first academic article I ever read which did that. At the time Harker told me that ACME was the only outlet where he could do that.

I thought that by now I would be seeing much more use of video inside articles. Maybe we are intimidated by the idea that they need to be polished and well edited. I appreciate how Carolin Schurr includes in her articles (2013; 2012)

short one to two minute videos from her fieldwork, and then goes on to analyze the scenes that they depict. Her video is a bit choppy, clearly taken by hand in the midst of protests and rallies, and her edits are minimal, simply the title screen and cut in and out suggested by akvo. Yet her videos convey a powerful sense of the scene she is analyzing, and are particularly useful because she is discussing performance and emotion.

Would it have worked for Mason to write a more conventional article that included some of this video as short clips interspersed throughout? As I understand it, he is trying here to get the viewer to slow down, be taken in by the moment, and get a glimpse of awe and transcendence. In theory a full video is more capable of doing that than an article with short clips, though sadly I doubt that many, academics or otherwise, will have the time and patience to sit through 20 minutes of something this slow and experimental.

As an activist who has participated in protest camps, and protests in front of military bases, I care deeply about more people knowing about and understanding these sorts of actions, so I wanted the prosaic details to be clearer at the start of the video so that viewers would get a better sense of what was being protested and how – the basic who is where doing what and why. I had my doubts that it was entirely clear that this was an academic action (and what that means), inside a larger peace camp, outside a trident base. In particular I wanted more on what an academic intervention looks like and what it might take to organize one ourselves. But what is more effective for movement building, learning the logistics of holding an academic workshop that simultaneously serves as a protest blockade, or being emotionally drawn in?

I do not have a single answer. Ultimately I want to encourage us all to use more video, in more ways, so that we can reach more people, and move more hearts and minds. This is particularly important for those of us who consider ourselves activist-academics and want to foster social change. Often we are collaborating with social movements that are way ahead of us on video use.

One simple thing we could all do, whether or not we are comfortable taking video while doing fieldwork, is to do short video abstracts of our articles. As a member of the International Advisory Board I pushed for Antipode to do more [video abstracts](#) of articles. Right now I am afraid that most of these are too long (they seem to average five and a half minutes rather than the magic three). They also tend to be made by academics simply talking to their laptops and by their eye movements clearly reading a prepared text from their screen, which can make them quite lifeless. I would suggest that instead you ask a friend to interview you with their phone, where they simply ask you who you are, and then what the main arguments in your article are, with a big timer on a screen behind them so that you can keep it right around three minutes. Or if you prefer to read a text I suggest that you use [slideshare](#) to show images rather than you speaking, as [this one does](#). As geographers we generally do a good job of coming up with images for our

conference presentations (dramatically better than some other fields do). We could recycle these images for a short video abstract once the article is out.

You could also simply have a friend record a video of you speaking at the conference. The [video](#) of Simon Springer presenting ‘Fuck Neoliberalism’ (2016), which is quite roughly shot by hand without a tripod, has 2,886 views. You could also simply open your laptop and point it towards the speaker and record a presentation that way. These videos do not need to be polished or edited. Do not hold yourself to the production standard of the [Antipode lecture videos](#) or the [AAG plenary videos](#), though these are a great resource (videos of the acme lectures apparently coming soon). You could then even include a link to your video in the published version, as Raghuram (2016) does in an early footnote. Making our conferences more widely accessible like this is all the more important in an era of travel bans and climate crisis.

Increasingly we can get funding for our video work if we build it in to our grant applications as what in Canada is called ‘knowledge mobilization’. Canadian geographers have even gotten Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funding to hire filmmakers and make entire professional documentaries. An example of this is the powerful 45 minute documentary *Guardians of Eternity: Confronting the Toxic Legacies of Yellowknife’s Giant Mine*, which Arn Keeling got the funding for and made in collaboration with a filmmaker and two local social justice organizations. It is fully [online here](#). Jessica Dempsey and Rosemary Collard got SSHRC funding to hire an animator and a production company and make, in collaboration with the environmental organization [the ETC group](#), the fantastic short animated videos “[What is Synthetic Biology?](#)”, “[Animal Traffic](#)” and “[Enterprising Nature](#),” the last of which is based on Dempsey’s book by the same name (2016). This is cutting edge activist-academic work, that is made to spur conversations and action about these topics. It comes with [a website](#) that includes discussion questions and a glossary as teaching resources for using these videos in the classroom.

We could all use more video to get the word out, but I do not think it makes sense for most of us to learn deep video shooting or editing skills. Instead I hope that we will increasingly be able to get funding to hire video directors, editors, and animators. Alongside that more polished work we ourselves can make more rough short videos, of our fieldwork, talks, and as short interviews about our articles. It is my hope that Mason’s *Ghosts of the Future* is at the forefront of a growing use of video in our field.

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